DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 446 069 SP 039 506

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TITLE Reflections of a White Teacher Teaching a Course on Racism.
PUB DATE 2000-04-28
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; *Consciousness Raising; *Diversity (Student); High School Students; High Schools; Higher Education; Racial Attitudes; *Racial Bias

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the experiences of a white university professor who taught two courses on race and racism at a local high school. Both classes included very diverse students. He attempted to be an anti-racist role model for all students, and he worked to make the classroom a safe space for students to talk. He showed respect, caring, and interest in all students and encouraged students to do the same. He found that African-American students were quite willing to challenge him, and he had to determine how to handle that. Some students, mostly but not only white students, felt uncomfortable by the racial critique that other students made of him. The professor struggled to overcome his own stereotypes as he worked with the students and listened to their opinions on race and racism. At one point, his whiteness played a role in the misinterpretation of a film on racism, and the students helped him see his error. He used the occasion to discuss the existence of race-based limitations on understanding, how and when it is constructive to charge someone with such limitation, and what would be a proper and constructive response to such a charge. (SM)

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ED 446 069

REFLECTIONS OF A WHITE TEACHER TEACHING A COURSE ON RACISM

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Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, April 24-28, 2000, New Orleans, LA.

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AERA, April 2000, New Orleans. Panel Presentation *Teaching and Writing About What You're Not, or The Nappy Hair Controversy Revisited: An Interactive Symposium*

REFLECTIONS OF A WHITE TEACHER TEACHING A COURSE ON RACISM

The context for my modest suggestions of guidelines about white teachers teaching students of color is antiracist (and, more generally, social justice) education. I view antiracist education as (at least in part) a form of moral and civic education. It attempts not only to convey historical and sociological truths and methods of interpretation, but a set of values related to individual character and civic engagement—interrogating and reducing one's own prejudices, empathizing with the experiences of racial "others," interrupting racist behaviors, committing oneself to racial justice, and the like[1].

I am a university teacher of moral philosophy and race studies. Twice (including this semester) I have taught a course entitled "Race and Racism" at my local high school. Both classes were very mixed, reflecting the striking diversity of the Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School. In spring '99, I had 15 students, of whom 10 were black-identified in some way, one Caribbean of Chinese ancestry, and 4 whites. (The blacks included a mix of distinct ethnicities, but most were African-American.) In my current offering I have 22 students, of whom 9 are black, 3 South Asian, 1 Hispanic, 2 (self-identified as) black/white mixed, and 7 white. The blacks are again of varying ethnicities but this time most are (second generation) Afro-Caribbean, primarily Haitian-American. Both classes contained a few immigrants. For both classes I have been assisted by a black teaching assistant from my university.

Obviously I regard myself as qualified to teach this course. So I would reject any attempt to impose an identity restriction on the material or the students a given individual can teach. There are moral and political dangers, as well as educational ones, to giving any credence whatsoever to racial identity in teaching and research. As has often been pointed out, if strictly enforced, such strictures would greatly limit the range of subjects any individual could teach. Blacks and Asians could not teach European history or philosophy. Latinos could not teach literature not written by Latinos. Once gender, age, national origin, immigration status, and any number of other identity features were brought to bear, the range of allowable subjects for a given individual would shrink to almost nothing.

On the moral front, credence to identity limitations lends support to a lack of trust across identity boundaries. If whites or Asians can not

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[1] (Blum 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000) provide a fuller account of the values involved in antiracist education.

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understand the experiences of Native Americans or blacks, then oppressed groups will be discouraged from recognizing the possibility and necessity of political alliances across identity lines. Many students, at least in my experience, approach learning with such a distrust. One of my black students this semester acknowledged to the class one day that when she first came into the course she was surprised to see any white students there. She assumed that a course on Race and Racism would "be a bunch of black kids sitting around talking about their oppression."

Contemporary students (and here I include my college students as well) do not have a strong sense of the historical record of struggles of oppressed people for social justice and the involvement of allies of different identity groups in those struggles. For example, in both offerings of the course I did a short unit on the Abolitionist movement. I was particularly concerned to emphasize the commitment and sacrifices of some white Abolitionists, such as William Lloyd Garrison. I asked students to speculate about the relations between black and white Abolitionists. Both groups of students thought the relations must be primarily suspicious and distrustful. They did not seem to contemplate the possibility that a moral or political identity as an Abolitionist might have given members of both racial groups an important bond. They kept thinking that white Abolitionists must have some kind of distinctly "white" agenda that they brought to the struggle against slavery.

A second moral or civic drawback to validating identity restrictions is that students from dominant, or at least non-oppressed groups (this included the South Asian students in my current class) are thereby discouraged from feeling empowered to act on, or even be in touch with, their anti-racist inclinations. They will be made to feel that they have nothing to contribute to the discussion. They will feel trapped in their "politically suspect" racial identity. Their development toward a proactive antiracism entitled "Race and Racism." will be stunted. Privileging racial identity as a student's inevitably most important identity inhibits students from developing a moral or civic identity as an ally or comrade in struggles for social justice[2].

Whiteness has the potentiality, in fact, to serve several positive functions for moral and civic education in the antiracist arena. Whites can demonstrate that they are able to acknowledge gaps in their own experience, and can learn from students and writers or color to begin to fill those gaps. Whites can buck the trend, the assumption, and the stereotype of white defensiveness by showing that they can acknowledge these shortcomings in a constructive and non-defensive manner. Whites, and white teachers in particular, can attempt to be anti-racist role models for both white students and students of color.

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[2] In (Blum 1999b), I draw on the work of Beverly Tatum to articulate the idea of a "white ally," as a goal of antiracist education for white students. But I criticize Tatum (1999) for not going far enough in overcoming a privileging of racial over moral identity.

In my Race and Racism course I attempted to model these educational and civic goals. I do not agree with those who feel that the racial identity of instructor and students has no bearing on the educational process. This unrealistically "color-blind" stance is not required by my earlier rejection of restrictions on who should be allowed to teach what material to which students. The issue is not *whether* a white teacher can teach racial material to students of color, but *how* he or she does so.

Let me give two examples of how these guidelines played out in my class. I tried as hard as I could to make the class a safe space for all the students to talk. I tried to show care, respect, and interest in every student, and encouraged students to do the same. The black students, especially in last year's class, were quite willing to challenge me. Once we had read an account by a young man whose father was African and mother African-American about the complexities of his own identity search (Wamba 1998). For discussion, I put on the board the question, "What were some differences the author experienced between the African and the African-American cultural influences on him?" I found it difficult to get the students to focus on this question. Several appeared reluctant to acknowledge the strong differences I felt the author was conveying between the African and the African-American cultures of which he was a part. Finally, one of the students said, "We answered your question. Now you are trying to do what white people always do—divide blacks and belittle our connection to Africa."

I was somewhat abashed by this response but attempted not to be defensive and asked the students to elaborate. Though they were not of uniform opinion on the question, several did feel that African-American culture was very strongly African in character, and also that white people sometimes ridiculed them for claiming a connection to Africa. I was not deterred in my own opinion that the former view was historically and culturally misleading at best. But I felt that this particular moment was not one in which to press that point, and that in any case I had missed the other source of the students' defense of the African connection.

Some students, mostly but not only white, were made uncomfortable by the "racial critique" that other students had made of me. In the following class we had what I thought was a productive discussion of how and when it is and is not appropriate to cite someone's race in attributing a limitation that one perceives (rightly or wrongly) in their understanding.

On another occasion, we had viewed the documentary film "Skin Deep." In an early scene the family of a white student is shown at dinner. The student had said earlier that he never heard a single positive thing about black people in his household, and in the scene in question his father expresses a wide range of offensive stereotypes of African-Americans. At one point a female adult at the table says something about Asian immigrants

being hard-working. This individual seemed to me a much more sympathetic person than the father and I interpreted her remarks to be gently challenging the father by saying that not all people of color were deadbeats, welfare queens, and the like.

Most of the students challenged my interpretation. They said the woman was as racist as the father, that she was using Asian immigrants to reinforce the worthlessness of blacks. The students expressed amazement that I could have missed this, and had taken the interpretation I did. We decided to replay the scene, and on second viewing it seemed clear that the students were right and I was wrong. I am not sure how I could have fallen into this error, since I am well aware of the way that the "model minority" stereotype of Asians has been used against blacks, to the detriment of both groups. Indeed, I had planned a reading on this very issue for later in the course.

Obviously my whiteness had played a role in this misinterpretation, and I forthrightly acknowledged this, and thanked the students for correcting me. Again, I attempted to use the occasion to discuss the existence of race-based limitations of understanding, how and when it is and is not constructive to charge someone with such limitation, and what is a proper and constructive response to such charge.

Teaching about race is unquestionably charged territory, and especially for those attempting to cross identity divides in doing so. One must be continually open-minded and responsible in dealing with student opinions. But we, and especially the white "instructorate" that comprises the vast majority of teachers, can not abandon this task for fears of "teaching what you're not." The struggle against racism demands that we weigh in, do our best, and keep learning.

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